

EXHIBIT 72

INSIDE COLUMBIA'S BETRAYAL OF ITS MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES DEPARTMENT

Columbia reassured its Middle Eastern studies scholars behind the scenes — then, to appease Trump, threw them to the wolves.

[Meghnad Bose, Sacha Biazzo](#)

April 16 2025, 12:30 p.m.



Students chain themselves to the fence of Columbia University in New York City on April 2, 2025. Photo: Mostafa Bassim/Anadolu via Getty

STUDENTS AT COLUMBIA University's Middle Eastern studies department were suffering from whiplash. Over two days in March, they

went from being reassured by Middle Eastern studies faculty that the university was supporting their embattled department to, just a day later, being hit with news that Columbia had cut a deal with the Trump administration.

At stake was some \$400 million in federal funding from the school that had been suspended by the White House. The Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies Department – or MESAAS as it is formally known – was at the center of the storm.

Pushing back on the White House's demands proved too tall an order at Columbia. The university administration made an announcement on March 21 that laid out a raft of policy changes. Among them was a plan to appoint a new senior vice provost whose work would include "a thorough review of the portfolio of programs in regional areas across the University, starting immediately with the Middle East," the [announcement](#) said.

MESAAS scholars immediately saw the school had cut a deal that put them in the crosshairs.

Now, for the first time, several insiders at MESAAS are speaking up about the turmoil facing their department, the back-and-forth between the Trump administration and university leadership, and how they are the ones caught in the lurch.

"It's saying one thing to the federal government and saying another thing to faculty and students."

"The university is being quite opaque in its language and its messaging, and it's saying one thing to the federal government and saying another thing to faculty and students," said Craig Birckhead-Morton, a 22-year-

old graduate student at MESAAS. “Obviously, it’s been very frustrating for us, this duplicitous behavior of the university.”

“I’ve spoken with several of my classmates who are also afraid of either their ability to research the things that they’re researching being restricted, or them conducting that research and coming under attack for it,” he said. “This is very scary.”

Short-Lived Reassurance

The rollercoaster ride had begun only last month. On March 7, the White House put the university on notice: The Trump administration [announced](#) that it was canceling some \$400 million in federal funding to Columbia.

In negotiations over the funding, the White House made a series of demands on March 13, including that the Middle Eastern studies department be placed under academic receivership for a minimum of five years – taking control of the department out of its own faculty’s hands. A Wall Street Journal [article](#) published on March 19 said Columbia was about to cave to Donald Trump’s demands, with a deadline approaching the following day.



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Then, on the day of the deadline, came an email from Gil Hochberg, the chair of MESAAS. Hochberg and three other senior faculty from the department had met with two high-level senior deans from the

university. They had come away from the hourlong Zoom discussion feeling relatively optimistic about maintaining “academic self-governing” at MESAAS.

“While many questions remain open, the four of us who attended today’s meeting, feel significantly more reassured that our department is being supported by the university as much as possible under the circumstances,” said the email, which was reviewed by The Intercept.

“We were told that it is very unlikely that we will hear anything determined this weekend,” Hochberg wrote. “The situation is complex and will take time – more time than we would like. March 20 was one deadline, but not a legally binding one.”

Defying Hochberg’s expectations, word from the Columbia administration came down quickly.

The very next day, on March 21, Columbia University made a sweeping list of announcements, chief among them that the university was going to appoint a new senior vice provost that same week, whose work would include reviewing programs that touch on the Middle East, ensuring “balanced” curricula, and processes by which curricular changes are made. (Neither Hochberg nor Columbia responded to requests for comment.)

Since Columbia’s announcement, uncertainty has reigned. The new vice provost was set to be appointed in the week of March 21. Only after three weeks, on April 15, did the university appoint Miguel Urquiola, a dean of social science at Columbia, as the new vice provost. Urquiola’s academic background is in economics, but his first major task as senior vice provost is to conduct a “thorough review” of Middle Eastern studies.

“Honestly, I don’t understand what this means,” said a MESAAS student, a Ph.D. candidate who asked that their name not be used due to concerns over their visa status. “It doesn’t make any sense. What does it mean for them to claim that they’ll be able to see how something is ‘balanced’? They’re not the people who are experts in these fields.”

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Inside MESAAS, scholars have viewed the developments of recent weeks as Columbia caving to the Trump administration’s demands. They fear control of the department is being wrested away from faculty – and, to make matters worse, little clarity has been available to students on how to navigate the changes since Columbia’s announcement in late March.

“There is no information that has been given since, so I’m just waiting,” said a Palestinian student at Columbia who asked for anonymity because of the crackdown on dissent at the school. “There’s just a general confusion.”

The Ph.D. candidate laid blame for the chaos on the university administration, not the department faculty.

“The faculty have also not been kept in the loop with a lot of these updates of what’s going on,” they said. “We do feel supported by our faculty, but we are isolated by the university administration.”



Photo: Meghnad Bose

Chaos on the Inside

For students at the Middle Eastern studies department, the university's apparent capitulation was particularly galling because it felt like an indictment of the department with no substantive critiques.

"The MESAAS department is not being attacked right now because of a lack of rigor in its coursework or a deficiency in the quality of the research that's being produced," said Birckhead-Morton, the graduate student. "The MESAAS department is one of the greatest Middle Eastern Studies departments in the country."

Other students, too, had come to Columbia looking to study at the highly regarded department.

“I came to Columbia specifically looking at MESAAS being home to some of the best scholars on Palestine,” said the Palestinian student. “Being able to work with them just really inspired me to apply to Columbia – it was my top choice.”

The internal MESAAS email and subsequent university announcement had come during spring break at Columbia. With classes set to resume on March 24, the Palestinian student felt dread over returning to campus.

“I was considering fully dropping out,” they said.

“In the past few weeks, I’ve just been very disillusioned by it all,” they said. “I would like my department to show a little ounce of courage.”

Wresting Control From MESAAS

For professors at Columbia, the move against faculty control at MESAAS reflects a larger attack by the Trump administration [on academic freedom](#) in the name of [ideological conformity](#).

“The federal government doesn’t get to tell ice cream shops what flavors to serve in what kind of cone, and they don’t get to tell universities what subjects to teach or how to teach them,” said Joseph Howley, an associate professor of classics at Columbia. “From the outside, the fact that MESAAS was targeted without justification or explanation suggests to me that this attack is being driven not by a concern for academic excellence or anyone’s safety, but by an extremist ideological agenda

that has employed the federal government to remake the university for its own ends.”



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Among the university's announcements on March 21 was a policy change stating that Columbia would be appointing “new faculty members with joint positions in both the Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies and the departments of Economics, Political Science, and School for International and Public Affairs.”

These appointments, according to Columbia, would be “reinforcing the University’s commitment to excellence and fairness in Middle East studies.”

Work on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict was the obvious target of the changes, Birckhead-Morton said, but other areas of study could come under the same scrutiny.

“Any coursework related to Palestine will certainly be the first to be removed or restricted or modified under this new regime that’s being imposed on us – that’s the biggest worry,” he said. “But there are other courses that are on settler colonialism, for example, that aren’t specific to Palestine, but could come under attack based on the statements of the university.”

For his part, [Mahmoud Khalil](#), a Palestinian graduate of Columbia, denounced the attacks on the department in an [op-ed](#) from immigration detention in Louisiana, where he is being held after having his green card revoked for his [activism at the university](#) against Israel’s war on

Gaza. In his op-ed, Khalil referred to the pressures on MESAAS as “McCarthyist and racist interventions at the Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African studies department.”



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While no active MESAAS professors responded to requests for comment, retired professors have been more forthcoming about recent developments at the department.

Rashid Khalidi, a former [Arab studies](#) professor at MESAAS, recently [wrote](#), “It was never about eliminating antisemitism. It was always about silencing Palestine. That is what the gagging of protesting students, and now the gagging of faculty, was always meant to lead to.” And Sheldon Pollock, a former chair of the MESAAS department, likened the government’s demands of Columbia to “[a ransom note](#)”: “Like a mob boss, the government threatens to cut off two of the university’s fingers: academic freedom and faculty governance.”

Professors at other departments also spoke out against the announced changes.

“Many people in the educational establishment were telling Columbia that it should resist these demands by the Trump administration, and it should stand up and take a stand forcefully,” said Michael Thaddeus, a professor of mathematics at Columbia and vice president of the university’s chapter of the American Association of University

Professors, which sued the Trump administration over the revoked funding.

Thaddeus said the university's decision not to pursue its own legal action against the Trump administration was "extremely disappointing."

Conference Disrupted

Each year, students at MESAAS get a chance to present their research at the department's graduate conference. This year, the conference – on the theme of uprisings in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa – was scheduled to take place at the university, in person, on April 10 and 11.

On April 1, though, an email went out to some participants announcing changes in the programming.

"In light of recent events at Columbia University, New York City, and the United States at large, we are writing to you about some last-minute measures we are taking in order to protect the safety of our conference participants," said the email, a copy of which was reviewed by The Intercept. "The conference, including the keynote address, will now happen only on Zoom."

The email went on to say that, despite the lack of an in-person forum, there would still be additional security measures. "We will be vetting all audience members, and request you to reply to this email with a list of people (friends, family, colleagues) with whom you want to share access to the conference," the email said.

"We haven't been directed to do this," said the MESAAS Ph.D. candidate. "It's really for our protection and for the protection of everyone speaking that these steps are being taken, to make sure that we can still

continue to have these conversations without becoming targets ourselves.”

“It is kind of an effort to keep the conference going despite all the odds that we are facing right now,” they said. “There is some concern that we will be constrained even further if we are in person.”

The Ph.D. candidate, however, added that the fact that the department had to change the program is a sign of the pressures on academic freedoms at Columbia and, in particular, MESAAS.

Another MESAAS student, who was slated to present at the conference and asked for anonymity because they are an international student, noted that the climate on campus meant that the events were not as widely promoted as usual.

“I am still happy that my work will be seen by people, but am sad and a little disappointed that it will be a smaller audience,” the student said. “It’s more like an underground secret meeting than a public rally.”

The Wider Struggle

When it comes to pressures on Middle Eastern studies departments, Columbia is far from alone. Despite recently rejecting the Trump administration’s demands, Harvard University in March [dismissed](#) the faculty leaders of their Center for Middle Eastern Studies, or CMES. Nonetheless, five days later, the Trump administration announced that

“It’s more like an underground secret meeting than a public rally.”

it would be reviewing close to \$9 billion in federal funding and multiyear grant commitments to the school.

“What happened at CMES at Harvard is shocking and egregious,” said Birckhead-Morton, the MESAAS graduate student. “So, they’ve come for Columbia, they’ve come for Harvard, we don’t want this to happen to other universities. We have to defend Middle Eastern studies across the board.”

Birckhead-Morton, who is Black and Muslim American, said the crackdown on Columbia’s academic functioning is part of a broader trend to attack scholarship seen as a threat to the powers that be.

“This is a continuation of the attack on critical race theory and ethnic studies,” he said. “It’s not just a Palestine issue or an Arab issue or a Middle East issue. These struggles and these histories are connected, and this crackdown is really going to affect us all.”

“This is an attack on scholarship, dissent, and critical thinking.”

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